

7 Simple Ways to Love an Autistic Child

1. Assume “all behavior is communication.” Their body language, words, noises, gestures, and actions are equally important, especially if the child is nonverbal. Watch, listen, and respond with understanding and kindness, even when discipline is necessary.
2. Assume competence. Our children are learning and growing on a different timetable. Just because they can't do something today doesn't mean they won't someday. Often, with the right supports, they far surpass our wildest dreams.
3. Encourage and expand their interests. As a child, Dr. Temple Grandin loved to draw horse heads. She claims she would have continued to draw them over and over again if her mother had not encouraged her to try drawing the horse's whole body. This is only one example of her mother's gentle but firm way of expanding Temple's interests. If not for her mother, Temple likely wouldn't have earned her Ph.D. in Animal Science and become a leading expert in livestock handling facilities.
4. Let them lead you. Autistic children often realize their limits better than we do. Within reason, we must allow them the autonomy to choose what is best. (A practical example: Does Henry have to attend school of some kind? Yes. Must he be in the performing chorus? No.)
5. Don't make them look in your eyes. Countless accounts from autistic individuals make it clear that looking in a person's eyes can be distracting at best and painful at worst. If a child listens best by looking away, do not punish them for processing your words differently than our social norms dictate.
6. Learn their social norms. Autistic people have their own customs, such as stimming and echolalia. We put such a burden on them to adapt to our modes of communication, but we should also try to understand and adapt to theirs.
7. Acknowledge their feelings. The tide is shifting: We no longer believe autistics do not have the same feelings and empathy as neurotypicals (non-autistics). We now know they not only share our emotions, but they may possibly feel even more deeply and strongly than we do.